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SCIENCE

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FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1896.

CONTENTS:

THE BUFFALO MEETING	277
<i>American Association for the Advancement of Science; Forty-fifth Meeting, Buffalo, Aug. 24-29, 1896: CHARLES R. BARNES</i>	280
<i>Botanical Gardens: N. L. BRITTON</i>	284
<i>Philip Lutley Sclater: G. BROWN GOODE</i>	293
<i>On the Floating of Metals and Glass on Water and other Liquids: ALFRED M. MAYER</i>	298
<i>A Gall-making Coccid in America: T. D. A. COCK-ERELL</i>	299
<i>Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education</i>	300
<i>Thirteenth General Session of the American Chemical Society</i>	302
<i>Lilienthal, the Aviator: R. H. THURSTON</i>	303
<i>Current Notes on Anthropology:—</i> <i>The Question of the Toltecs; Classification of Primitive Implements; The Ruins of Copan: D. G. BRINTON</i>	304
<i>Current Notes on Physiography:—</i> <i>Gulf Stream and Labrador Current; Preglacial Erosion Cycles in Illinois; The Piedmont Plateau of Virginia; Notes: W. M. DAVIS</i>	305
<i>Current Notes on Meteorology:—</i> <i>Work of the Weather Bureau in Connection with our Rivers; Winds of the South Atlantic off the Coast of Brazil: R. DEC. WARD</i>	306
<i>Psychological Notes: J. MCKEEN CATTELL</i>	307
<i>Scientific Notes and News:—</i> <i>THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION AND 'SCIENCE'; General</i>	309
<i>University and Educational News</i>	314
<i>Discussion and Correspondence:—</i> <i>The Dewey Decimal Classification and Scientific Classification: AKSEL G. S. JOSEPHSON. Meteor or Bird? FRANK M. CHAPMAN. Curious Freak in an Apple Tree: T. H. LENNOX, L. H. BAILEY</i>	315

Scientific Literature:—

<i>Berenson's Florentine Painters of the Renaissance: W. JAMES. Starr's Atlas of Nerve-cells: H. H. DONALDSON. Meyer on Tenerife: WILLIAM LIBBEY</i>	318
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THE BUFFALO MEETING.

THE meeting last week was one of the smallest in the recent history of the Association, but it was of unusual interest and importance. The address of the retiring president, which we have already published, was from a master hand, and the meeting was presided over by one of the great men of science of the world. The scientific work of the sections was as a rule good, and in several cases, especially in chemistry, in geology and in botany, was excellent. We must count on another comparatively small meeting at Detroit next year, but we believe that the outlook has never during the present decade been more hopeful for the Association.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science has two serious difficulties with which it must contend. One of these is the scattering of American men of science over a wide territory; the other is the increased specialization in science

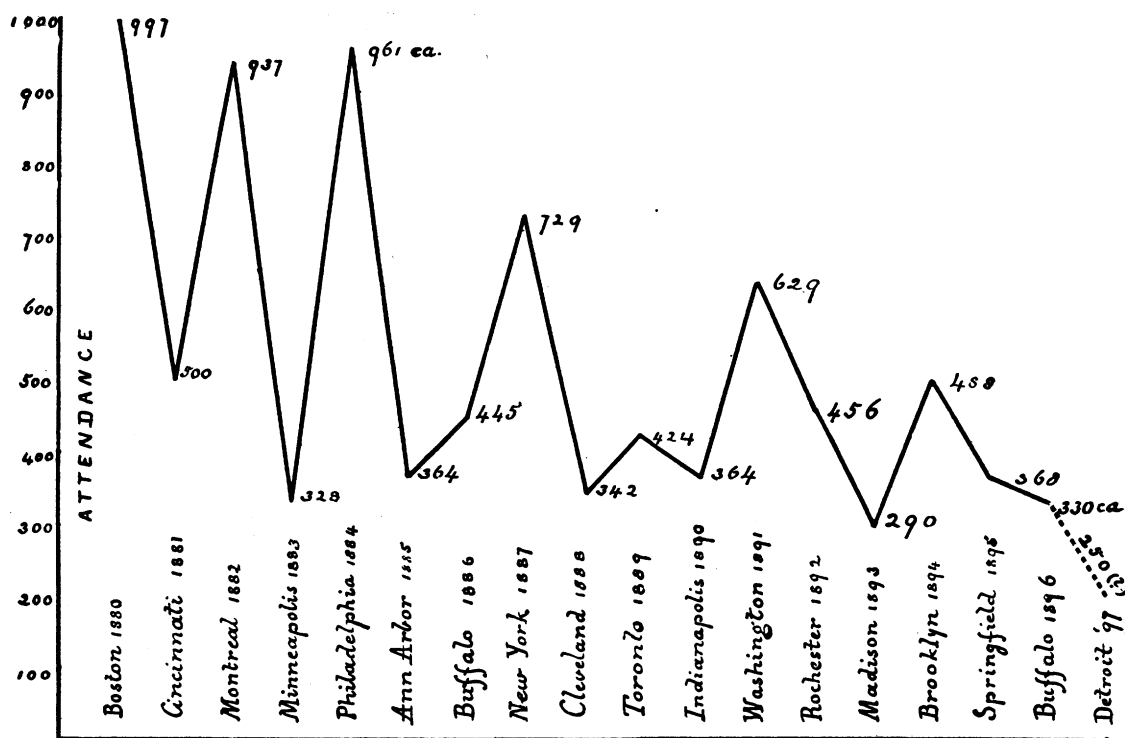


FIG 1.

and the special societies which have sprung up in consequence. Yet these two difficulties are the strongest arguments that can be urged for the necessity of the Association. The fact that men of science are so widely separated, and have no established center where they are likely to come in contact with each other, makes the annual meetings of the Association essential. The fact that great specialization in science is needful makes it peculiarly important for the sciences to be kept in touch. The sciences are but members of science, which is an organic body. As Aristotle has said, "a hand cut off from the rest of the body is no longer a hand."

The dispersion of American men of science is inevitable, and is indeed favor-

able to the advancement and diffusion of science. We can but appeal to all to promote the common welfare by attending the annual meetings even at a great sacrifice of time and money, and try to make the meetings so valuable that none can afford to be absent. In the case of the special societies arrangements can be made, and are being made, by which they will not weaken, but strengthen, the Association. If part of the time of the meeting be given to these societies, subsections being organized to make specialization as complete as may be desirable, and the rest of the time be given to joint meetings of several sections and of the entire Association for the discussion of questions of common interest and great importance, all the

objects of the Association will be accomplished.

It must be accepted as a fact that the attendance at the meetings (as shown in the accompanying curve) after reaching its maximum from 1880 to 1884 has steadily declined. It is also true that with some noteworthy exceptions, leaders in science have in recent years very generally absented themselves from the meetings. We think this is from no lack of interest in the aims of the Association, but from inertia and habit. It is true in psychology as well as in physics that a body at rest will remain at rest until moved by some external force. Fortunately when once in motion it will continue to move in a straight line. The time has come to apply the force.

The election of Prof. Wolcott Gibbs as president of the Association, and men such as Dr. G. Brown Goode as vice-presidents for some of the Sections, was a courageous act, the value of which cannot be overestimated. A majority of the nominating committee believed that present conditions offered an opportunity for further courageous action of much importance. It was recommended that the Association meet next year at Toronto to welcome the British Association to American territory and to join with them in the scientific work of their sections. The Toronto committee sent a delegate to Buffalo with a cordial invitation, and we could have welcomed the British Association through a retiring president and a president-elect equal in accomplishment to any delegate from Great Britain. The following year will be the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the Association, and in Boston or New York, with the same officers,

we might have held a meeting far surpassing any in the history of the Association.

The recommendation of the nominating committee was not accepted in the general session. The question was nicely balanced, and there was room for difference of opinion among those interested in the welfare of the Association. It seems, however, evident that the Association should be a true democracy. Having chosen its delegates, their deliberative action should not be reversed by inconsiderate impulse. As Huxley has said, "there may be wisdom in a multitude of counselors, but it is usually in one or two of them." Folly is also likely to be concentrated in one or two of a crowd, and unfortunately folly is more contagious than wisdom. Whatever may have been the merits of the present question when it was before the nominating committee, the action of the general session has given a warning that should be heeded.

If a meeting apart from the British Association were to be held, Detroit seems to be the best place, and it was of course desirable to choose a time not conflicting with that of the meeting of the British Association. The curve of attendance demonstrates that the meetings at Cincinnati, Minneapolis, Ann Arbor, Cleveland, Indianapolis and Madison have always been stepping stones in a downward path, and we fear that a meeting at Detroit, beginning on August 9th, will be no exception. For this very reason we must use our best efforts to make the Detroit meeting creditable, and begin at once to plan for a notable meeting in Boston or New York on the occasion of our fiftieth anniversary.